



4. Omens and Celtic Warfare

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Llŷn peninsula, Llanllyfni), Denbighshire (the Llangollen district), Merionethshire (Blaenau Ffestiniog), and south Cardiganshire (Aberporth).

In all the Anglesey instances the baking was done outside the house, and was known in most places as *pobi yn y baw* 'baking in muck' (or, possibly 'dung'). A fire was lit outside the house and kept burning with furze, dried cow-dung, and any material, *e.g.*, flotsam, which could be found. The pot inverted on a griddle (or as in the Holyhead district, on another pot) was placed in the red-hot ashes and a fire kept burning so as to cover the pot. I am informed from the Llangollen district of Denbighshire that "it was invariably the custom to bake out-side the house." My colleague, Mr. F. G. Payne, tells me: "In 1920 when seeking information about baking in the pot near Aberporth, Cardiganshire, I was told that such baking had usually been done outside the cottage on an outcrop of bare rock. The rock would be brushed clean and the pot inverted over the loaves. The fuel heaped around the pot in my informant's immediate neighbourhood was chiefly furze. Incidentally, it was stated that if the fire were kindled with straw from the same threshing as the grain from which the flour was ground, the bread would be sweeter." It would be of interest to know how widespread such a belief may be.

One further method of baking and roasting outside the house remains to be described. This is reported to me as having been practised "about 45 to 50 years ago in a cottage a few miles out of Fishguard in Pembrokeshire." The method was, to use my informant's actual words, as follows. "The chicken was cooked in an iron *crochan*, or *cidl* as it was called in Pembrokeshire. A hole was made in the ground outside the cottage: it was lined, bottom and sides, with red-hot peat, the crock put in with the lid on, and then covered with more peat and left to bake. The tart was done in the

"same way and I can assure you that the dinner left nothing to be desired. Loaves of bread were baked in the same way and it was the nicest bread I ever tasted."

I acknowledge with gratitude the help of the many collaborators who supplied me with the information which has made this paper possible. In all cases, it is shown that the method of baking was well-known from Pembrokeshire through mid-Wales to Anglesey and as far east as Denbighshire down to the second half of the nineteenth century, and that in certain areas, notably considerable parts of Cardiganshire, it is still practised. It is difficult at the present stage to distinguish references to the baking-pot *qua* baking-pot in the old literature since such pots were used for a variety of purposes. But it may be noted that the Welsh Laws refer to *e badell ar trebed*⁴ (pan—or pot—and tripod) as the wife's property. It is possible that these may be the objects illustrated in fig. 1.

I propose, when opportunity permits the collection of data, to examine the distribution and (as far as is possible) the history of the built-in oven in Wales and its relation to the pot-oven culture. The use of the term *popty* (bake-house) for 'oven' in certain areas is in itself a problem of considerable interest. The presence too of earthenware wall-ovens of sixteenth-century date in the Vale of Glamorgan is significant. The last century has seen the intrusion of bricked wall-ovens into parts of the Welsh moorland where they were formerly not general. To distinguish it from the pot-oven (*ffurn*) the wall-oven is known in several areas as *ffurn fawr* (big oven) or *ffurn wal* (wall oven). But whether the built-up oven has a long history is a matter still to be determined. It is, however, evident that the pot-oven remained a characteristic feature of Welsh (as of Irish) life until modern times.

⁴ J. Gwenogvryn Evans: *Facsimile of the Chirk Codex of the Welsh Laws* (Llanbedrog, 1909), p. 33.

OMENS AND CELTIC WARFARE. *By Ellen Ettlinger.*

4 An attempt will be made in these pages to reconstruct some ways of early thought by examining omens as far as they are connected with Celtic warfare.

The life of primitive man depended upon his

unceasingly vigilant attitude towards the phenomena of nature. Among these there were uncanny accidents, strange coincidences or vivid dream-impressions which took hold of his imagination. By pure intuition and without any analogy

man interpreted a stirring natural happening as a warning of trouble ahead. Similar or recurrent experiences caused the attribution of an evil foreboding to a particular event. The newly-won knowledge was passed on to the medicine-man who handed the facts and the meaning of the 'omen' down to his successor. As time went on the functions of the medicine-man gradually separated more and more from each other and developed along their own lines.¹ Magicians, diviners, leeches, judges, and poets emerged and were initiated into the omen-language in order to satisfy the requirements of their respective activities.

While Diodorus' statement about Gaulish bird-omens (V, 31) refers to professional diviners, there is, I believe, only one allusion in Irish legend to druids who 'watched' the voices of birds.² Another passage reveals not only that the Irish kept ravens and wrens for the special purpose of divination, but also that bird-omens had become intelligible for everyone.³ The same phase is presumably reflected by Alcuin, who, writing in A.D. 735 to Charlemagne, simply stated that auguries were drawn by the British from the flight and cries of birds.⁴ In regard to the popular understanding of bird-omens general remarks (such as 'Birds presaged the troubles of Lloegyr'⁵) are exceptional, and descriptions of dark birds, appearing in great flocks, hoarsely croaking or loudly screaming⁶ are more common.

Once the importance of omens had been recognized, they were certainly sought everywhere. An unlimited number had to be avoided. Therefore they were apparently restricted and selected by admitting only those occurrences as ominous which corresponded to general conceptions. Nature-study, belief in magic, as well as religious thought are reflected side by side in Celtic omens. Sometimes it is obvious to which of these three categories the omen belongs—at other times they are so commingled that it is almost impossible to discern which category had priority.

Three main features are outstanding :—

1. Spontaneous omens have always been associated with isolated short episodes in the very near future. This characteristic discloses that primitive man's mind was preoccupied only with the very next event, and that he regarded it as an isolated occurrence without any connexion with previous or ensuing

happenings. Such an attitude is also emphasized by his constant search for portents.

2. The belief that bad fortune, though announced by an omen, could be turned away by abstaining from action conspicuously points to the same origin as the conception of taboo (which Prof. Warde Fowler has put forward as pre-animistic).⁷
3. The warning character of the spontaneous omen is so predominant that it is difficult to resist the impression that the 'good' omen belongs to a later period than the 'bad' omen; possibly to a period in which the constant fear of threatening danger no longer haunted man. The establishment of the 'good' omen may be connected with a considerable change in man's attitude towards the 'bad' omen. Action was no longer avoided, plans were no more given up, but merely postponed until a favourable omen appeared. Such a waiting attitude has been twice described in the Táin.⁸

However, warfare does not often allow of delay. Hesitation which might prove fatal was prevented by inducing the means necessary for divination and by interpreting the omen thus obtained according to preconceived ideas.⁹ We may suppose that, at first, the unbiased and impartial character of the omen was respected. Later on, a degradation of the omen-idea was caused by the magicians' struggle for increased power over their tribe, by their deliberate attempts to influence the outcome of the omen according to their own needs. Gradually the omen lost the character of a pure sign, and became a magic-carrier like a charm or a spell. Omen-rites were performed, the luck-bringing aspect of which relegated their ominous character more and more into the background.

Celtic omens can be divided into two groups. Firstly, fortuitous omens; secondly, omens initiated by human agency. A great number of the fortuitous omens was derived from the flight and cries of birds. Pliny has recorded an experience which can be found amplified in Celtic legend,⁹ namely, that men who had lost their way reached safety by following the direction of a flying bird. Does not the conclusion suggest itself that the bird possess secret knowledge of things hidden to man?

The Celts looked upon crows and cranes as

bringers of evil tidings. The presence of crows frequently observed near the slain on the battlefield may have brought about their association with death and disaster, and consequently with the war-goddess, the Morrigan.¹⁰ Crows flapping and croaking around the house were taken to be the Morrigan, in her favourite disguise, announcing death and destruction.¹¹ Mostly the war-goddess, who could take many different forms, prophesied in the shape of a bird.¹² Does this not point to the probability that the omen preceded prophecy?

D'Arbois has set forth that the three cranes of Irish legend represent the three hypostases of the war-goddess, Morrigan, Badb, and Macha.¹³ However this may be, cranes were 'birds of evil' omen, and so much so that no warrior who chanced to see them would proceed on his way to 'battle that day in spite of his having bound 'himself to go.' The observation that cranes eat serpents—chthonic animals par excellence—may have given rise to the belief that their knowledge and wisdom came from the powers of the nether world 'which nobody would willingly visit.'¹⁴ The crane's association with Mider, 'who was one 'of the kings of the other world,' designates Mider's theriomorphic past. When he was anthropomorphized the crane became his attribute, retaining its previous 'power with many 'virtues.'¹⁵

Animal-worship survives in the use of former sacred animals as omen-bringers. Dio stated in his *Roman History* (LXII, 6) :

When the British Queen Boadicea had finished speaking to her people, she employed a species of divination, letting a hare escape from the fold of her dress ; and since it ran on what they considered the auspicious side, the whole multitude shouted with pleasure, and Boadicea, raising her hand towards heaven, said : ' I thank thee, Andraste . . . I supplicate and pray thee for victory . . . '

Boadicea's attribution of the omen to a purposive divine will is unique in Celtic tradition unless this feature belongs to Roman rather than to Celtic thought. But her choice of a hare as an omen-giving animal may well have been in accordance with Celtic belief.¹⁶ The way a hare runs doubtless appeared mysterious, and may have greatly contributed to its being regarded with awe.

Universal is the belief that domestic animals foretell by strange behaviour the approaching death of their master. Conaire clothed in words

the meaning of his lapdog's sudden howl, which portended the coming of battle and slaughter.¹⁷ The restive behaviour of Cuchulain's horse is one of the sure forebodings of the hero's death.¹⁸ The origin of the prophesying horse lies deeper than mere natural observation, and becomes more obvious in relation to Celtic oracles. Here the moving meeting between St. Columba and the pack-horse may be recalled,¹⁹ because it reflects so strikingly the presentiment of death ascribed to the horse, and shows at the same time the Celtic liking for marvellous traits.

In turbulent epochs terrifying but natural occurrences became mixed up with imaginary events. Tacitus (*Annals*, XIV, 32) has handed down to us that just about A.D. 61

from no ostensible cause, the statue of Victory at Camulodunum (Colchester) fell down, with its back turned, as if flying from the enemy. Frenzied women sang of coming destruction : outlandish cries had been heard in the council-chamber, and weird howlings in the theatre : an image of the colony in ruins had been seen in the estuary of the Thames ; a blood-red ocean, and impression of human bodies left by the receding tide, were interpreted as hopeful signs for the Britons.

Throughout the ages blood was looked upon as the very life-giving power, and it can be readily understood that its appearance portended death.

Among Cuchulain's death-omens there is described how his mother Dechtire 'proffered him that vat from 'which to take a draught before journey or expedition 'undertaken was to him a certitude of victory ; but '(this time) what would be in the great vessel but 'crimson blood alone.'²⁰

Blood is mentioned in Celtic legend colouring the waves of the sea. The bed of the river became red with gore when Badb appeared as a 'Washer-at-the-Ford' foretelling death to Cuchulain and Cormac.²¹

Apart from the colour of the waves of the sea, their sounds too were taken to be ominous. The three celebrated Waves of Erin warned of deadly danger, or foreboded the approaching death of kings or chieftains, by their unusually loud and solemn roar in stormy weather. Néde cast a spell upon a wailing wave, 'that it might reveal to him what the matter was.' The Celtic saints did not need to have recourse to magical practices. God Himself had granted them to understand what the waves were singing.²²

Since Celtic imagination willingly responded to sound-omens, is it to be wondered at that man's future destiny could be divined from the sound of his voice ? Dil, the blind magician, shared this deep insight with several saints.²³

Miraculous voices as well as miraculous appearances have been recorded. We read that weapons uttered cries when falling from their appointed places. Tulchinne the Juggler experienced a similar miracle.²⁴ The circumstances vary which cause the spontaneous moving and crying of the weapons—the omen, however, retains its disastrous nature. That prophetic weapons did not always predict evil is attested by Cuscraid's spear announcing the eve of triumph, when its silver windings ran round by the side of the bands of gold.²⁵ Although prophesying weapons appear at first sight to be mere products of poetic licence, they are in fact reminiscences of a former cult of weapons, survivals from an earlier period when spirits were believed to reside in weapons, and when arms were used in ritual.

So far all the omens under consideration were fortuitous ones; druids and magical means have been mentioned only in passing. In the second group, human agency is the decisive factor. The endeavour of the magician to influence the nature of the omen to his own advantage becomes apparent. Among the evidence for initiated omens the first rank appertains to omen-fires foretelling victory or defeat by the direction of their flames and smoke. Their popularity still lives on in the Welsh name for a 'bonfire,' *coel certh* ('a sure omen').²⁶

It is evident why omen-fires were frequently used in warfare. They could quickly be prepared whenever or wherever needed. Magicians, who always accompanied the army had to perform the ritual of kindling the omen-fire because they were trusted to produce infallibly a victory-omen by commanding the wind to blow in the luck-bringing direction. The psychological influence upon the fighting spirit of the gathered warriors, to whom the rising flames were easily visible, was certainly taken into account.

Magicians were not the only human beings reputed to control the storm. The Gauls credited the nine priestesses of Sena with the extraordinary gift to rouse the seas and the wind by their incantations.²⁷ Theodore's reference in his *Penitentials* (XXVII, 31) hints at the frequency of storm-raisers in his time. The three witch-daughters of Calatin,²⁸ like many other witches throughout later centuries, sent forth storms. A fortunate coincidence has preserved 'in truly historic documents' some details about the life of

one of the most famous Irish magicians, Mogh Ruith, as well as a most elaborate description in Irish legend of his omen-fire-ritual.²⁹

Cormac's chief and oldest druid, Ciothruadh, advised a druidic fire against the enemy . . . 'let our men go into the forest, and let them cut down and carry out loads of the quickbeam, of which large fires must be made; and when the fires are lighted, if the smoke goes southwards, then it will be well for you to press after it on the men of Munster; and if it is hither or northward the smoke comes, then, indeed, it will be full time for us to retreat with all our speed.' So Cormac's men forthwith entered the forest, cut down the wood indicated, brought it out, and set it on fire.

. . . Mogh Ruith, perceiving what the northern druids were preparing for, immediately ordered the men of Munster to go into the wood of Lethard, and each man to bring out a faggot of the rowan-tree in his hand; and that the king only should bring out a shoulder-bundle from the side of the mountain, where it had grown under three shelters . . . Mogh Ruith's favourite pupil built the wood up in the shape of a small triangular kitchen, with seven doors; Mogh Ruith then ordered each man of the host to give him a shaving from the handle of his spear, which . . . he mixed with butter and rolled up into a large ball, at the same time pronouncing words in rythmical lines . . .

'I shall bring the rout on them now,' said Mogh Ruith; 'let my chariot be ready, and let each man of you have his horse by the bridle; for, if our fires incline but ever so little northwards, follow and charge the enemy.' . . .

Mogh Ruith enquired three times of his people about the conditions of the flames from the two fires, for Mogh Ruith was blind. When he learnt 'they had risen up to the clouds of Heaven, and were like two fierce angry warriors chasing each other,' . . . he flew up into the air to the verge of the fires, and commenced to beat and turn them northwards. When Cormac's druid, Ciothruadh, saw this, he also ascended to oppose Mogh Ruith; but the power of the latter prevailed, and he turned the fires northwards, and into Cormac's camp. . . . Cormac, on this, ordered a quick retreat out of the province.

Ciothruadh's advice either to attack or to retreat, according to the direction of the flames, was certainly dictated by his conviction that the enemy's power would extend to wherever the smoke of the omen-fire floated. The same idea is also manifest in the counsel which the druids gave King Laoghaire at the sight of St. Patrick's fire.³⁰ Mistaking St. Patrick for a cunning magician, and his paschal fire for an omen-fire, King Laoghaire's druids suggested its immediate quenching to prevent flames and smoke from spreading over their territory. Analogous to this is the passage which tells how the druid Lugaidh ignited a large fire and commanded his five sons to follow its five fiery streams, assuring them that these would lead them to their future inheritances.³¹

While in this legend there is no hint as to which kind of wood was used for the omen-fire, Mogh Ruith as well as Ciothruadh chose faggots from the rowan-tree just as the druids of the Dessi before their victorious battle at Inneoin (*see* p. 13). A fire from rowan-tree-wood served also for a druidical ordeal.³² Sir John Rhys ascribed the power of inspiration attached to the rowan-tree to the use of its scarlet berries for intoxicating, inspiring drinks.³³ Anyhow, the use of rowan-tree-branches for divining purposes reveals that the Celts credited the whole tree with inherent magic virtue. The same applies to the yew-tree: it was by the help of four wands of yew that the druid Dallan discovered where Queen Edain was concealed.³⁴ This parallel shows that both beliefs go ultimately back to tree-worship.

There is no literary evidence for the casting of lots in relation to warfare, although it is proved by the Irish word *crann-chur* that the 'act of casting wood' was performed by the Celts.³⁵ From legendary descriptions of ordeals by means of lots,³⁶ one conclusion may be deduced, namely that poets and judges participated in the ordeal. Did the poet alone cast the lots for divination?

Warriors too took part in omen-rites. Their dances before battle and after victory are well-known; is it not possible that the hero's magical posture of 'standing-on-one-foot' represented a kind of solo-dance? We read that the performance was carried out by Cuchulain, by Sol (one of King Arthur's warriors), and by Cícul.³⁷ A reference in the *Táin* seems to indicate that Cuchulain had been instructed in this feat by his master Fergus, probably because of the great significance of the amazing exertion of will-power, which has parallels in different parts of the world.³⁸ Divine assistance was invoked, and if the rite could be carried through in the 'correct' way, it was at the same time considered a fortunate omen. The psychological effect of this omen-rite upon the onlooking host is reflected in the following passage:

Lugh was heartening the men of Ireland that they should fight the battle fervently so that they should not be any longer in bondage . . . Wherefore then Lugh sang . . . as he went round the men of Erin, on one foot and with one eye (closed) . . .³⁹

Numerous other instances from Celtic legend permit us to assume that Lugh's circuit was made right-handwise, sun-wise, around his army. As the walk *deisseil* is undoubtedly connected with

sun-worship, Lugh's circuit 'on-one-foot' supports Loomis' theory that the idea underlying this magical posture should be traced back to the 'wide-spread Celtic conception of the anthropomorphic sun.'⁴⁰ Celtic saints frequently circumambulated their army sun-wise before hostilities started; sometimes modifying the pagan practice by carrying sacred relics with them, and ascribing victory to the virtue of their relics.⁴¹

It is possible that the circuit was undertaken in order to lustrate the army. Lustration of the pagan army is alluded to in St. Columba's prayer before the Battle of Cúil Dremne, in which the saint denounced the opposing 'host that marches round a cairn.'⁴² Being in harmony with the divine power was a preliminary condition for a victorious combat. Therefore the army marched towards the right, sun-wise, and offence against the sacred tradition was punished by defeat. The sons of Eochu Feidlech 'marched left-hand-wise 'round Erin . . . with the result that they were 'defeated and decapitated.'⁴³ That turning a chariot right-hand-wise was looked upon as a good omen is related in the *Táin*.⁴⁴ In further extension of this belief the right hand became associated with good luck while the left hand was considered as unfortunate. For that reason Cuchulain tried to avoid his doom by taking the dogflesh, which was strictly taboo for him, in his left hand, saving his right hand for battle.⁴⁵

I have dwelt at some length on the 'correct' ritual performance because its importance should be fully realized when we approach the problems of omens received by means of sacrifice. Tacitus' statement about sacrifices in the island of Mona is strikingly in favour of their religious background.

The next step (of Suetonius) was to install a garrison among the conquered population, and to demolish the groves consecrated to their savage cults: for they considered it a pious duty to slake the altars with captive blood and to consult their deities by means of human entrails. (*Annals*, XIV, 30.)

But again we should not forget that Tacitus 'naturally, perhaps inevitably, used the language 'of the ritual and religion of Rome, much as (Caesar) attempted to identify the Celtic with 'the Roman Gods.'⁴⁶ This view may be corroborated by the fact that among the druids in the British Isles there were neither 'augurs' nor 'priests' in the strict sense of the word. As far as we can judge from Tacitus' record, the omens obtained by sacrifice did not greatly differ

from other portents. We have already mentioned the miraculous appearance of blood, which has its natural counterpart in Celtic sacrifice. Involuntary bodily movements, such as sneezing, were among the most common omens in every-day life.⁴⁷

In Y Gododin we are told that 'the sacrifice (was) brought down to the omen fire.'⁴⁸ Does this mean that the victim was to be thrown into the fire and that the nature of future events was divined from the changes of the victim's colour or from its shrivelling form? Was it the duty of the magician to perform the sacrifice, and divine again from the aspect and the direction of the flames? Unfortunately no final answer can be given in view of the extremely scanty evidence in Celtic legend.

I should like to conclude these considerations by referring to the 'victory-omen.' Druids proclaimed before the battle that victory would be theirs, as surely as a certain visible event would take place. To gain knowledge by any possible means of his opponent's preconceived 'victory-omen' became of vital importance to the magician. Once he knew the well-guarded secret, it was easy for him to trick the enemy into committing an act of evil omen.

On the eve of the Battle at Inneoin the druids of the Dessi made Dil (the blind druid of the men of Ossory)

drunk and learnt from him that whichever of the two armies should first kill or wound any one of the other should be the loser of the fight. On the morning of the battle Dil proclaimed that not one of the Dessi should be slain or wounded there by the Ossory men. 'But the druids of the Dessi formed an old serf, 'Docheth by name, into the shape of a red (hornless) cow. . . . Then the cow went to encounter the men of Ossory and flings herself upon them . . . and is killed. . . . And then they saw it was the body of a man that had been slain. The men of Ossory were 'routed.'⁴⁹

An amazing victory has been recorded—unfortunately too laconically—by Tigernach.

In the Battle of Cúil Dremne Fraechán made the 'druid's fence' for Diarmait, the Christian (!) king who headed the southern Hy Neill army. Tuatán overturned the 'druid's fence.' Maiglinde (from the opposing northern Hy Neill army) went across it, and he alone was slain (while Diarmait lost 3000 men).⁵⁰

Comparison with the foregoing story suggests that the following facts underlie this rather obscure passage: Tuatán learnt—perhaps by a trick—Fraechán's intention to proclaim before the battle that victory would be with his warriors as surely as the enemy would be unable to penetrate his 'invisible magic barrier.'⁵¹ He persuaded Maiglinde to cross the 'magic barrier.' The sight of the reversed omen plunged Diarmait's army into utter confusion, and caused its complete annihilation.

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AN OLD PWO-KAREN ALPHABET. *By G. Marin. Illustrated.*

5 The alphabet at present used by the Pwo-Karen is an adapted form of the Burmese, and was introduced not very long ago by Christian missionaries.

As I was travelling down the Salween River in 1934, I learnt that, in earlier times, the Pwo-Karen used another form of script which looked somewhat ' like the scratchings of a chicken on the ground.' The Burmese kings, I was also told, prohibited under threat of capital punishment the use of this ancient writing, as of other things likely to sustain local nationalism ; but a spark of the old Karen tradition smouldered in the jungles, and, at one place at least, was still alive.

After searching for this spot, I discovered it at some little distance from the village of Hnikya (Burmese : **ñit̃a* ; Pwo-Karen : **θane:t̃ai*), which lies below Pa'an, on the right bank of the Salween. Here, in a jungle glade, I found a large hall, raised on posts, but open to the winds ;

access was by means of a ladder. This was the headquarters of what was known as the **l̃eʔk̃e* community, so called from the name of their sacred book. Here I made the acquaintance of **phu 6wi bauɴ*, a kindly, bedridden old man who was their religious chief. Unfortunately the only inhabitant of Hnikya who could serve as an interpreter, and who very obligingly accompanied me, had an extremely limited knowledge of English, and I had practically none at all of any of the local languages. This made conversation rather difficult.

I learnt, however, that the religion of the **l̃eʔk̃e* had been founded at this very place in 1860 by the present high priest's grand-parents, **phu-thi-θau-th̃o* and his wife **phi-mai-ka-li*, and that it numbered to-day a few thousand followers among the Pwo-Karen, mainly on the eastern bank of the river. These worship a single deity called **arija*. Their holy day is the Saturday,